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SUBJECT: KASPAROV SAYS SOLIDARITY AIMS TO DISMANTLE, NOT DESTROY, PUTIN REGIME

REF: MOSCOW 3229

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Beyrle for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In a wide-ranging November 3 meeting with the Ambassador, former world chess champion and United Civil Front (OCF) chairman Garry Kasparov predicted that economic and political pressures will hasten government transformation and the end of the Putin regime before 2012. Kasparov highlighted recent legislative moves by Putin to further consolidate power, adding that Russians nonetheless will press for political change within two years upon experiencing their first "real" economic crisis. At that time, according to Kasparov, the new Solidarity movement will be positioned to "dismantle" rather than "destroy" the Putin regime. Kasparov also discussed the November 2 Nashi protest outside U.S. Embassy Moscow, how an Obama presidency would render Kremlin anti-American propaganda obsolete, and the "out of control" situation in the Caucasus. End Summary.

Predicts Putin Regime Will Not Survive Until 2012

¶2. (C) United Civil Front (OCF) chairman Garry Kasparov told Ambassador during their November 3 meeting at Spaso House that, due to burgeoning economic, political, and psycho-social pressures, "the Putin regime will not survive until 2012." Facing "a serious crisis" and "insurmountable challenges" over the next one to two years, Kasparov added, the government will be unable to maintain the stability it has enjoyed as a result of providing "psychological comforts" to the Russian population.

¶3. (C) Kasparov noted that "change has always been associated with bad news" in Russia, but that Russians eventually will thirst for change and more information when their personal situations deteriorate. Russians are not prepared yet for a major change, Kasparov observed, but "passive disapproval is widespread." It takes "massive despair to get people on the streets," which could result from an expanding economic crisis unlike any experienced before by Russians. Kasparov dismissed the 1998 economic breakup as "a hiccup, not a crisis." In the end, Kasparov explained, "people trust Putin but they trust dollars more," so the Premier's position could be in jeopardy should economic prosperity or access to dollars be threatened.

Russia's Three Strata: Beware of the 14 Percent

¶4. (C) Kasparov pointed to what he sees as three distinct strata of Russian society. First, 85 percent of the population constitute the vast majority of Russians who have not benefited from the "new Russia's" explosion of wealth.

These Russians purchase little more than food, clothing, and some durable goods and appliances; they are politically passive and would press for change only if their situation became extremely dire. The second group, comprising just 1 percent in Kasparov's accounting, are the very rich, who derive their wealth from the ruling regime and therefore have little incentive to press for change.

¶15. (C) However, according to Kasparov, the remaining 14 percent of Russians "are the biggest threat." Totaling about 22 million people and earning incomes between 4,000-20,000 USD per month, this group constitutes what best approximates a middle class in Russia. They are more urban, younger, and more socially and politically active, Kasparov postulated. Additionally, he explained, they also are most at risk in any economic crisis, which they have never faced before. When this 14 percent starts losing jobs or if their salaries freeze, Kasparov cautioned, "there will be problems" and room for political change will emerge.

Putin Manipulates Purse-Strings and Citizenship

¶16. (C) Kasparov warned that Putin remembers the lessons of the Soviet Union's collapse, adding that the "genetic memory of 1991" will lead Putin to tighten his rein on power whenever his supremacy is threatened. As indicators, Kasparov pointed to two pieces of legislation currently in the Duma. First was a law to put the Premier alone in charge of the budget, allowing him to make changes without asking the Duma. As a result, Kasparov explained, Putin will not need to rely on Deputy Premier Igor Sechin or the Prosecutor

General to shut down companies or rid himself of troublesome oligarchs -- he can do it through budgetary manipulation. Second, Kasparov pointed to a draft law to redefine Russian citizenship, including the removal of requirements to speak Russian. According to Kasparov, the law is aimed primarily at Central Asians and Chinese, who provide cheap labor to pay into the depleting pension fund and offer the added benefit of a ready-made electorate. After all, Kasparov explained, "ignorant, uneducated crowds make good voters." Kasparov also acknowledged that the government may seek to manufacture outside threats to distract Russians from internal crises, but he noted that any actual threat will be from the East (China), not the West.

Solidarity Aims to Dismantle, Not Destroy, Putin

¶17. (C) Kasparov explained the new opposition Solidarity movement as a "necessary parallel project" to "clean up the right wing in Russia" while remaining independent of the Kremlin. Describing his personal politics as center-right, he portrayed his role as connecting the right-leaning Solidarity movement with left-leaning entities in The Other Russia and the National Assembly. As such, Kasparov acknowledged that he uses his "Soviet reputation as a Russian champion" to maintain strong ties with leftists and nationalists. (Note: A November 5 Kommersant article described infighting among Solidarity's organizers over concerns that Kasparov "is trying to seize power in the new movement." End Note.)

¶18. (C) Solidarity's goal, according to Kasparov, is to "dismantle, not destroy, the Putin regime." The movement will favor non-violent resistance, boycotts of "false elections," and the rejection of violence as a source of power in Russia. Responding to questions about funding, Kasparov remarked that the movement does not need much money and that it can obtain "sums of 100,000 or 200,000 dollars when it needs." The "good news is that we do not need much money, and the kind of money we need is available."

¶19. (C) Aside from non-violent resistance, Kasparov explained that Solidarity's strategy will be to survive until Russia's

economic and "social-psychological situation" deteriorates to the point that public demand for change grows and opportunities open for political opposition. When that time comes, Kasparov predicted, the widening lacuna between what broadcast media tell Russians is happening and what actually is happening will lead citizens to seek new sources of information. "Solidarity will try to fill that demand," he offered, adding that it must be in position when the opportunity arises since "we're running a marathon, but we must be ready to sprint the last 100 meters."

¶10. (C) Solidarity's Moscow Region conference scheduled for November 2 was forced to postpone when the movement was unable to secure a venue. The reserved venues all canceled at the last minute, citing unexpected fire inspections or, in one case, fear of hosting an opposition event. Kasparov promised that a Moscow Region Solidarity conference would take place in November, before the planned December 13 national conference. (On November 4, Yabloko Youth leader and Solidarity organizer Ilya Yashin told us that the Moscow Region conference would take place November 8.)

¶11. (C) Commenting on the imminent transformation of the Union of Right Forces (SPS) into a right-leaning loyalist opposition party, Kasparov scoffed that Acting SPS Chairman Leonid Gozman is "part of the regime" and "part of the corrupt structure" of the Kremlin.

Kremlin Propaganda Machine Takes Aim at U.S.

¶12. (C) Kasparov observed that the November 2 mass protest at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow (reftel) demonstrated that "the government is in a panic" if it needs to resurrect moribund groups such as Nashi. Sharing observations from OGF members at the protest, Kasparov estimated that 90 percent of the attendees were from outside Moscow and came because they were paid. "Nashi has no ideology," he remarked. Kasparov concluded that the event, which he called a "Surkov project," was undoubtedly funded by Kremlin slush funds. Indeed, he theorized that Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff Vladislav Surkov personally pocketed more money from the event than OGF can spend in an entire year.

¶13. (C) Kasparov also predicted a landslide Electoral College win for Barack Obama, adding that the importance of an Obama victory will resonate throughout the world. In Russia, he proposed, "an Obama victory is disaster for Kremlin propaganda" that had been able to downplay U.S. claims to liberty with assertions that African-Americans continued to be treated poorly. As a result, Kasparov noted, Russia will have to reshape much of its anti-American propaganda.

Caucasus Situation "Out of Control"

¶14. (C) Turning to regional events, Kasparov described the situation in the North and South Caucasus as "out of control." The recent war with Georgia, he observed, proved that Chechens are the only viable military force in Russia, since they led the Russian army into Tskhinvali, South Ossetia. Remarking that Chechens feel empowered as a result, Kasparov pondered "how long can we pay ransom to (Chechen President Ramzan) Kadyrov" to keep Chechnya under control. "Many would join Kadyrov if he raises the green flag (of Islam)," Kasparov speculated, although he acknowledged that it is unlikely Kadyrov would do so.

Comment

¶15. (C) Even if Kasparov is correct that the government will not move too severely against him personally given his enduring reputation as a "Soviet champion," the government will show much less hesitation in marginalizing Solidarity --

although infighting among the movement's leaders may do the job more effectively. The plan to wait patiently for a year or more for a crisis to weaken the current government, an idea Kasparov was flogging even before Solidarity's formation, illustrates how timid and frail Russian political opposition has become. It also shows that the democratic opposition smells blood in the water as the economic crisis deepens, with Solidarity's strategy predicated on the crisis leading to widespread unrest and rapid political upheaval. However, with quarrelsome leadership, zero access to national broadcast media, and a negligible following outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg, Kasparov and Solidarity are at present far from any position of real challenge to the regime. And we expect the regime will do whatever it takes to keep it that way. End Comment.

BEYRLE